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ABSTRACT

The primary assumption behind the development of this guide is that program managers, faced with the responsibility of designing and planning an educational program, or modifying an existing resource system, might profit from a better understanding of the nature of needs assessment. The first section of this guide presents an overview of needs assessment as a context in which program managers can consider the nature of needs assessment relative to their situation. Key elements common to most needs assessment approaches are presented. The second section describes commonly used approaches to data gathering and their principle applications. The third section contains considerations for needs assessments and the remaining section characterizes effective needs assessment. (Author/RE)

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PROGRAM MANAGERS' GUIDE TO DESIGNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

* *OVERVIEW OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT*
* *GENERAL APPROACHES TO DATA GATHERING*
* *CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING NEEDS ASSESSMENTS*
* *CHARACTERISTICS OF THOROUGH AND EFFECTIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT*

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PROGRAM MANAGERS' GUIDE TO DESIGNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

Selecting, designing, modifying, and planning programs in education and other social service areas is often preceeded by a step called needs assessment. Needs assessments are typically carried out in two types of circumstances: 1) when an agency or organization designs and plans a program of services, such as a technical assistance agency mandated to deliver services to a group of model educational programs; and 2) when an agency or organization wishes to change its program to achieve better or different results, such as a school district seeking to improve students' reading achievement through curriculum change.

Needs assessment is similar in many ways to evaluation. It contains data collection and analysis steps, it compares desired outcomes (goals) with actual outcomes, and it results in information from which decisions can be made. The major difference between needs assessment and evaluation is that needs assessment focuses primarily on the *beginning* of the enterprise -- selection and planning -- rather than on the *implementation* of the program.

Needs assessment is a process, not just an instrument or tool. The selection or design of a needs assessment is critical to the usefulness and validity of the outcome.

Purpose of the Program Managers' Guide

Needs assessment, like other educational and social service innovations, has received a great deal of attention, resulting in numerous tools and approaches available. This Guide is not intended to add to that sometimes confusing array of alternatives.

The primary assumption behind the development of the Program Managers' Guide to Designing Needs Assessment is that program managers faced with the responsibility of designing and planning a program of services, or modifying an existing resource system (such as a curriculum) might profit from a better understanding of the *nature* of needs assessment, some guidelines for designing or selecting a needs assessment approach, and essential characteristics of thorough and effective needs assessment.

The Guide addresses program managers specifically because of their role as prime movers (decision makers) in the enterprise. It is the program manager (project director, school district administrator, social service program director, etc.) who has responsibility for planning services, initiating change, and assuming accountability for decisions.

Sequence of the Guide

The first section of the Guide presents an overview of needs assessment as a context within which program managers can consider the nature of needs assessment relative to their own situation. Key elements common to most needs assessment approaches are presented.

Section Two describes commonly used approaches to data gathering, and their principle applications. Section Three contains considerations for designing needs assessments and Section Four presents characteristics of thorough and effective needs assessment.

SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Needs are determined by goals. Education and other social service enterprises have a set of what might be thought of as "macro" goals which primarily address human development and the quality of life. Needs at this macro level are determined by what is required to achieve individual development and quality of life goals. For example, an aim of education (macro goal) is to help individuals acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for them to realize their potential as people. Needs at this macro level include those experiences and resources required to achieve the goal.

An assessment of the entire educational system, then, would examine what it would take to achieve the goal -- and how far we are from achieving it.

Most of us, however, do not operate at the "macro" level. Our position in the constellation of social service enterprises is closer to the direct action -- designers, administrators and implementers of programs which directly serve the client population of our enterprise, whether it be school children or the elderly.

Within this context, needs assessment more often involves comparing current realities -- resources, approaches, and results -- with desired outcomes. Needs assessment assumes that goals, objectives, and realities are known, or knowable. It does not provide for developing them.

The overall purpose of needs assessment is to analyze the discrepancy between what is and what is desired in a way that illuminates means of reducing the discrepancy.

Standard elements in all needs assessment processes include data gathering, analyzing, and summarizing and reporting results. Data gathering is the most important and extensive phase of needs assessment, and Section Two discusses alternative approaches to data gathering and characteristics of each.

SECTION TWO: GENERAL APPROACHES TO DATA GATHERING

The assessment of the discrepancy between current realities and desired states requires that accurate information be gathered to illuminate the nature of the discrepancy and to point the direction for change.

Approaches to data gathering can be thought of on a continuum from highly client centered approaches to highly system centered approaches. Highly client centered approaches to gathering data are characterised by open ended questions to which clients can respond with a wide range of personal (and subjective) information. The responses to open ended or client centered approaches, therefore, are largely structured by the respondent in substance, length, breadth, and depth. System centered data collection, on the other hand, structures the responses tightly. Data gathering techniques are closed -- the respondent must conform to specific questions, forced choice options, and limited opportunity for personal or idiosyncratic information to be included.

Methods of data gathering correspond to this continuum of client centered to system centered. Moving from highly client centered to highly system centered techniques, the approaches to gathering data are: *Active Listening, Structured Interview, Questionnaire, Survey, Checklist, and Observation.*

Active Listening

In the active listening approach, clients/consumers are sought out to discuss their situation. The data collector explains that the discussion is intended to illuminate needs (system wide, individual or both) and encourages the respondent to present his or her view of needs. The data collector asks only probing and clarifying questions and records the discussion on audio tape or in extensive notes.

Structured Interview

Structured interviews contain specific questions asked of all respondents. Usually the interview has approximately fixed length; the data collector has the list of questions and may or may not share them with the respondent. The questions are gone through in sequence; appropriate probing questions are often anticipated on the interview protocol sheet. If the respondent strays from the question, the data collector may disregard that information. If the questions are not relevant to the respondent, limited opportunity is provided for restructuring them.

Data is usually recorded on a form; interviews may be taped as a back up.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire can be relatively client centered or system centered, depending on its approach. It may include questions which address needs directly, such as "Do you need help with ____?" or it may ask for information only indirectly related to the respondent's perception of need, such as "Do students in your class receive individualized assistance with reading?" In the latter case, the information-seeking question may be followed by a more open ended question, such as a "why" question. These may require a forced choice response (selection of one response from four or five options).

The questionnnaire can probe information, opinions, or attitudes. Because it is a paper-pencil technique, instructions are usually contained on the questionnaire form and little guidance or encouragement is given for expanding the boundaries of the instrument. It can be administered individually or in large groups, through the mail or in person.

Checklist

A checklist, like a questionnaire and structured interview, can contain items directly related to need (such as a checklist of need areas) or items indirectly related to needs, such as a checklist of characteristics of the respondent, or both. The respondent makes forced choices, but generally within a fairly extensive group of alternatives. The choices are usually not forced down to one; usually there is provision for several responses to be checked, often for the responses to be prioritized.

Observation

The most system centered form of data collection is the observation, because it involves no direct input from clients. Data collectors using observation guidelines go directly to the site of activity and record what they see and hear within coded or structured data collection formats. This technique is most system centered because it dictates a perspective from which the clients' reality is viewed and because of the lack of interaction, the perspective can not be challenged by the subjects.

Data collection approaches may include variations on the above techniques, and in many cases a combination of techniques will be used. For example, a school system whose goal is the reduction of discipline problems and vandalism might employ open ended discussion and observation as a precursor to large scale questionnaire administration to faculty and students. The open ended discussion and observations would illuminate possible needs (or reasons for the discrepancy between current reality and desired state) from which the instruments could be designed.

Section Three presents guidelines and considerations for designing or adapting needs assessment procedures.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DATA GATHERING TECHNIQUES

SECTION THREE: CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Though many needs assessment "tool kits" have been developed and marketed, the consumer must choose and in most cases adapt these to the situation to be studied. Considerations presented in this section are included to equip the program manager with a means for making these choices and adaptations, and for designing a tailor-made needs assessment for his or her unique situation. The caveat to consumers of packaged needs assessments is that the effectiveness of any needs assessment depends highly on the degree to which the data collection procedures are perceived as relevant to the situation and to the change alternatives possible.

Numerous factors should be considered in designing or selecting needs assessments. The major ones are presented below.

1. What is the nature of the system? Program improvement or delivery of services must be planned within the context of the target system. What are the overall goals of the system? What are the resources (fiscal, physical, human)? How ready and willing are key actors for change?

2. What is the nature of the system's desired outcomes? If desired outcomes can be described in concrete, operational terms agreed upon by all parties, and if steps from current reality to desired outcomes are fairly straightforward, then the needs assessment can concentrate on the needs of the individuals affected. Example: the desired outcomes of the Federal Disaster Relief Program include providing temporary shelter and food to victims of disasters. Those goals can be translated into concrete outcomes fairly simply by determining what is meant by shelter (type, length of stay) and food (amount, quality). Once these decisions about the delivery system are made, along with criteria s for determining who should get the services, the needs of individuals can be assessed: who needs service? what food and shelter requirements does each have? what about them is important to know in order to effectively deliver the services?

When the relationship between desired outcomes and means of achieving them are less clear, i.e. the goal of a school system to reduce discipline and vandalism problems, the needs assessment process must be more probing, focusing on the overall system rather than primarily on the individuals.

3. What are the resources for change? The counterpart to considerations about the system and its desired outcomes is consideration of the resources for change. Needs assessment is conducted when someone has a resource available to apply to the assessed needs. Is the resource limitless, or is it narrow in scope? Is it entirely specified, or is there a range of alternative resources from which to draw, such as a pool of vlaidated programs, or a range of technical assistance services? What are the fiscal, physical, and human resources which can be applied to the needs identified?

4. What is the timeline for change? Does the client system or the resource system have a limited time in which to address needs?

5. How flexible is the situation? Is the client system open to "playing it by ear" or is it necessary to provide highly detailed plans of action early on? Is the resource system capable of riding with the currents of change and modifying services and approaches to meet changing needs? (Human service enterprises are not static -- nor do they lend themselves to precise analysis).

6. How aware is the client system -- and individuals in it -- of their needs? Are individuals from whom data will be gathered in touch with their own situaiton enough to articulate their needs in terms relevant to the resource system? For example, if the client system is a group of highly developed model programs and the resource system is a technical assistance

agency funded by the same source, the clients are likely to know a great deal about their needs and be able to articulate them in terms relevant to the resource system. A curriculum development effort geared to elementary students can not assume that the children will be able to express their needs for curriculum -- but they can be meaningful sources of data nevertheless.

These considerations and others are important in influencing the design of needs assessment procedures. Section Four presents characteristics of thorough and effective needs assessment.

SECTION FOUR: CHARACTERISTICS OF THOROUGH AND EFFECTIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The characteristics presented here are drawn from experience with a number of educational and social service endeavors and are applicable to them. The list is not exhaustive, nor is it viewed as essential that all characteristics be present in all situations where the needs assessment designer seeks an effective process.

Needs assessments should be:

Related to the capacity and goals of the delivery or resource system.

Resource systems are finite. Even in cases where multiple alternatives are available to apply to the identified needs, there are limits. Good needs assessment processes take these limits into account and do not inflate expectations of the client group by assessing needs that can't be delivered on.

Related to the characteristics of the client system.

Effective needs assessments are designed with characteristics of the client system in mind -- the attitudes, values, styles, and fears of individuals from whom data will be collected, the forces operating on the system, and the relationship between the organization or individuals conducting the needs assessment and the subjects of it.

Proportionate in scale to the resource system.

If the resource system has only a year to deliver, an elongated needs assessment process is inappropriate. As in medicine, an overly involved diagnostic process is no good when the patient is in trauma or when the doctor is going off duty in an hour.

Supportive rather than threatening.

Unless the clients trust the process, particularly how information they reveal about themselves will be used, the needs assessment will not be valid or complete. Asking questions which require the respondent to reveal inadequacies or actual non-compliance with law or mandate must be done carefully and with assurances that the information will not be used against the individual or the organization. And then it must not be.

Lead directly to service or plan of action.

The assessment process must be more than diagnostic, it must be prescriptive. Great leaps from the results of data analysis to decisions about service or changes to be made should be avoided by anticipating in advance and gathering data about the conclusions which might be drawn from the results.

Instructive.

Ideally, the client should emerge from the needs assessment process more aware of his or her needs. Since most social service enterprises have as a value the increased capacity of individuals and organizations to meet their own needs, it behooves needs assessors to help clients better understand themselves so that they can act in their own behalf to meet their needs.

Data-based.

Information from which decisions are made and services rendered should be reliable and valid. Data should be current.

Systematic.

Procedures should be consistent throughout the client system. Data should be recorded carefully and consistently. Even open ended data should be analyzed within data analysis techniques determined in advance and applied consistently.

Interactive.

Wherever appropriate, the needs assessment process should include opportunities for interaciton with the client system. Besides assuring greater clarity in responses, the interaction informs the client of how data is to be used, the intent of questions, and encourages the client to provide the most relevant information.

Ongoing.

Needs change. As soon as the resource system begins, needs will alter. Needs assessment must keep pace, continually informing the deliverers of service and the planners of change.

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